



environmental
services
association

Energy-from-Waste is vital infrastructure that we all rely upon; it's time to stop demonising it

LONDON, 31 July 2020

Statement issued by the Environmental Services Association (ESA)

Energy-from-waste (EfW) serves a vital public sanitation function in the United Kingdom and is a complementary part of a rapidly-evolving, holistic, waste management system invested in by the recycling and waste management industry – which has long been leading the pursuit of a low-carbon circular economy.

For more than twenty years, our industry has led the national rise in recycling and invested billions to deliver modern waste management solutions across the whole waste hierarchy. Many of the ESA's largest members are invested in the full spectrum of waste management infrastructure from energy-from-waste facilities, which safely deal with non-recyclable waste, to state-of-the-art recycling and reprocessing facilities. For years, ESA members have been calling for more ambitious recycling targets and we are pleased to see the targets enshrined in the European Circular Economy Package have been adopted by the UK this week. We continue to work with Defra and other government departments to create the right policy framework to achieve these ambitious recycling targets.

The ESA strongly supports independent environmental journalism, but erroneous and misleading articles like those published today by [Greenpeace](#) and [The Guardian](#) are holding back the full potential of EfW as a contributor to national low carbon heat and power; maintaining our national reliance on landfill; and continuing to fuel fear and a confrontational public dialogue about energy recovery. By repeatedly describing operators as “*incinerator companies*” they also misrepresent the diversified nature of many of the businesses involved in this activity and the essential contribution they make, across the waste hierarchy, to a circular economy in the UK.

In line with the waste hierarchy, once economically recyclable materials have been collected, EfW remains the best option for treating residual waste. As well as putting waste to further use, thereby upholding the principles of the Circular Economy, EfW provides reliable, decentralised, low-carbon electricity sufficient to power nearly two million UK homes.

The ESA and its members believe that it is time to stop demonising EfW technology and to embrace energy recovery alongside recycling, re-use and waste avoidance measures, in the way that our European neighbours have for decades. A new national policy focus centred around unlocking the benefits of EfW will help to make plants more efficient, by facilitating local heat-offtake, and will improve a planning process that is all-too-often needlessly confrontational and influenced by the “anti-

incineration” lobby – which steadfastly ignores the clear scientific consensus, including advice from Public Health England (PHE)¹, and the Environment Agency, that these facilities are safe both for the environment and the public. There is a complete misapprehension that this lobbying will drive recycling and reduction of resource use, when it in fact only allows landfill to prevail.

A new report, published this month by independent think-tank [Policy Connect](#) and supported by a cross-party group of parliamentarians, identifies the valuable “untapped potential” of EfW infrastructure, which could be unlocked if the UK Government pivots residual waste policy away from landfill and export towards domestic EfW heat networks. The right policy signals from government could unlock billions of pounds of additional private investment and see UK energy from waste capacity increase to address the country’s residual waste capacity gap (the result of which sees millions of tonnes of waste still sent to landfill each year) and used to generate low carbon heat for half a million homes.

Planning permission for new EfW facilities is typically determined by elected officials in accordance with current national and local planning policies. For a variety of political and cultural reasons, UK EfW facilities have tended to be located outside of urban centres or alongside similar industrial use classes, where opportunities for viable residential heat networks are limited or non-existent. There are of course exceptions to this though and examples where EfW facilities have been successfully integrated into towns and cities both in the UK and Europe.

The planning process requires full and fair statutory consultation with a range of stakeholders and many operators engage in additional consultation with the local communities they intend to serve. Relationships established between operators and these communities often extend through the planning process to construction and operation, with a number of facilities incorporating well-attended visitor and education programmes, as well as long-running community liaison groups. EfW facilities are among the most heavily regulated industrial installations in Europe and the environmental regulators will only grant a permit if they determine that a plant is in an appropriate location; any and all appropriate risk mitigation is in place; and that the plant will meet its permit conditions. In particular, very strict emissions limits are imposed upon these facilities and performance against these limits is monitored closely and regularly by regulators.

While there may be a proximity trend between industrial areas and disadvantaged communities, this proximity trend applies equally to many other industrial facilities like distributions centres, factories and other public utilities – none of which were singled-out in the Greenpeace investigation. We acknowledge the complex issue of social justice in relation to spatial planning and believe that this is an important topic in need of further understanding but, like the rest of society, our industry operates within the legal and policy parameters set out for us.

The thousands of people who work at Energy-from-Waste plants across the country are rightly proud of the role they play in protecting the environment and many are from the very communities served by these facilities. Our industry has been actively involved in the development of the new Resources & Waste Strategy for England, which will instigate the systemic change required across the whole economy to achieve higher recycling rates and greater resource efficiency, while limiting the non-recyclable waste sent for energy recovery. Demonising EfW in the meantime does nothing to move the country closer to achieving a more circular economy.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/municipal-waste-incinerators-emissions-impact-on-health/phe-statement-on-modern-municipal-waste-incinerators-mwi-study>

ENDS

For further details please visit www.esauk.org

Press Contact

ESA Press Office: 020 7591 3214

Email: b-johnson@esauk.org